

Moby-Dick Book Club

Session 1: Tuesday, September 15th, 2026 at 5:30pm

Etymology to Chapter 40

Featured Guests: Professors *Mary K Bercaw Edwards* & *Tim Marr*

Welcome to *Moby-Dick* Book Club!

The New Bedford Whaling Museum *Moby-Dick* Book Club is a virtual series exploring Herman Melville's iconic American novel. Whether you're reading it for the first time or returning to it with fresh eyes, all are welcome to take part in engaging, thought-provoking conversations led by some of the world's leading Melville scholars.

Each session centers on a guiding theme and includes a suggested reading schedule—but participants are encouraged to read at their own pace and join when they can. Bring your thoughts, questions, and interpretations to share with fellow readers and Melville experts alike.

Reading Guide: Etymology to Chapter 40

These first set of “land chapters” take us from *Moby-Dick's* up to the first sighting of whales in the sea and the lowering of whaleboats from the *Pequod*. Readers are introduced to seaport life in New Bedford and Nantucket, almost all the crew, the question of Ishmael, the conundrum of Queequeg and Bulkington, the problem of the whale and whaling from varied angles, including a distinctive shift in style and perspective beginning with “The Advocate” and “Cetology.” There are so many ways that Melville and Ishmael play with meaning making—through plot, language, tone, and explicit provocations. The following are some questions that readers can consider as they set out to process the wonders of this complex text.

1. Why doesn't the book actually start with the famous first line, “Call me Ishmael”? This famous beginning is preceded by four prior textual performances: 1) the dedication to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2) the Table of Contents, 3) ETYMOLOGY, and then 4) EXTRACTS. How are we to read this material? Who are the varied narrators of these early pages? How, for example, might Ishmael be related to the “pale Usher” of ETYMOLOGY? Who is this Sub-Sub librarian and what might he signify?
2. How does Chapter 1: “Loomings” serve both as a foreshadowing of the saga to come and a frame upon which Melville lays out the yarn of his tale?



3. What is the significance of the painting in the entry to the Spouter Inn? What does that episode of close reading tell us about Ishmael and his mode of engagement with the world, and how we as readers might approach his book?
4. The early land chapters are comedic, even burlesque. Where does this narrative mode give cover to more serious content to come at sea?
5. How does the “bosom” friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg teach the reader about how to entertain the strangeness of difference, including reading Melville’s own words?
6. How are we to make sense of Bulkington’s “apotheosis” in Chapter 23, “The Lee Shore”?
7. What do we learn from the nature of the mates and harpooners that Melville assembles on his fictional *Pequod*?
8. How is the reader (and Ishmael) impacted by Melville’s decision to keep Ahab out of sight for so long after so many foreshadowings of him and allusions about his character?
9. Given Chapter 32 “Cetology” to chew on, what can we say about Ishmael/Melville’s relationship to science, to systems, and to settled truth?
10. What is the effect of the disruptive change of narrative role and storytelling in Chapter 24 “The Advocate,” followed by Chapter 32 “Cetology” and Chapter 33 “The Specksynder”?
11. Ishmael might be said to be prone to losing himself in thought. Consider, for example, Chapter 35: “The Mast-Head.” Consider the pros and cons of oceanic, meditative life.
12. What does the interaction of the crew in Chapter 40 “Midnight, Forecastle” suggest about what the ship is made to represent?